

Finer Grounds

Mark Lesson 9: Tumult at the Temple

Before You Begin:

Do some research into the Old Testament, what prophecies can you find concerning the Messiah and the purification of the temple?

Jesus has just reached Jerusalem, where he will spend his final days. Mark once again uses a dramatic flair to capture the emotion and the importance of the upcoming events in Jesus' life. As we go throughout Jesus' next interactions, notice the interesting structure of events:

- A First visit to the temple (11:11)
- B Cursing of the fig tree (11:12–14)
- A Jesus takes action in the temple (11:15–19)
- B The fig tree is found to be dead (11:20–25)
- A Jesus returns to the temple (11:27)

Everything in this section literally centers on Jesus cleansing the temple, what that means for the Jews, and what is coming. Keep this in mind as we begin this study.

Read Mark 11:12-14

This brief passage sets the stage for a very potent and direct object lesson. As they are traveling Jesus sees a fig tree, beautifully leafed out ahead of season. The foliage on this tree was so magnificent that it was logical to expect the tree to at least have some green, baby fruit, yet there was nothing. Jesus reacts to this barrenness by verbally cursing the tree.

Think About It:

Luke 3:8 tells us to bear fruit in keeping with repentance, Colossians 1:10 tells us to bear fruit in every work, and John 15:2 tells us that every branch that does not bear fruit will be taken away. When a Christian “looks” magnificent to the world, yet bears no fruit, does Jesus view us any differently than the fig tree?

How can we intentionally strive towards bearing more fruitful for the cause of Christ?

Read Mark 11:15-19

Malachi 3:1-4 and Zechariah 14:21 both prophesy of the Lord cleansing His temple. It is baffling to me how the Jewish leaders failed to see so many prophecies being fulfilled in their own actions. Jesus cast his judgment on the fig tree, and now he is casting his judgment on the Jewish leaders and the temple (France 2002). As Jesus states in verse 17, it was not the fact that animals were provided in general, that was a necessity for the sacrifices, the problem is that they are selling goods within the temple itself. The House of the Lord was no longer a house of prayer, but was a place to make a profit. Jesus is challenging the Sanhedrin in a very bold and public manner, and at this point the people love him for it and are astonished by his actions. If the Jewish leaders want to hold on to their power, they will have no choice but to respond.

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It is also interesting to note that Jesus actually cleansed the temple twice in his ministry. This account of the cleansing recorded by Mark occurs at the very end of Jesus' ministry, right before the passover. John's record, however, in John 2:13-22 takes place at the beginning of Jesus' ministry (although also when he traveled to Jerusalem for the passover). There are also several other differences: in John's record Jesus forms a whip, while no whip is mentioned in Mark. In John the apostle's remember the prophecy from Psalms 69:9, and in Mark Jesus is teaching as he cleanses the temple. However the most potent difference is in the reaction to the cleansing. In John Jesus is still new on the scene; he has not yet healed the sick, and he has not yet attracted thousands of followers, so the Jewish leaders confront him immediately. In Mark, by the end of Jesus' ministry, they know exactly how much of a threat Jesus is to their power, so rather than confronting Jesus right then, they leave in order to plot the most effective way to bring him down.

Think About It:

While there is no longer anything "holy" about the building that we worship in, I Corinthians 3:16-17 says, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple."

In what ways can we destroy God's temple today?

Do you think this is something we take seriously as 21st century Christians?

Does Jesus feel any differently about God's temple today than he did when he cleansed the temple in Jerusalem?

Take Action:

Make a specific plan of action for purifying God's temple in your home. This can be anything from giving up the caffeine that you are addicted to, to getting rid of your cable, putting away non-essential electronic devices, or being honest with a trusted friend about a hidden sexual sin in your life and asking them to help hold you accountable.

Read Mark 11:20-26

Jesus cursed the tree for being unfruitful, purged the temple of the defilers, and now he and his apostles return to find the cursed tree shriveled and dead only a day later. Jesus is using the fig tree as an object lesson for his apostles, to symbolize the spiritual condition of the Jews and the ultimate result of their faithlessness (Orbison & Petrillo 2004).

At the same time, he is teaching them of the amazing things they can accomplish with enough faith. My trouble, however, is getting that little seed of doubt out of the way. While I have complete faith in God and his power, I continually doubt my ability to do my part. I need to strive to remember that God has used all manner of people for his glory, and that I simply need to have faith in His abilities rather than my own, and be willing to be used for His glory. In addition, we also need to remember that God's ways are higher than our ways (Isaiah 55:8-9). When Jesus prayed to His Father in Matthew 26:39 Jesus made his requests known to God, but also said, "Nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." Jesus is telling his apostles that they have

the ability to do amazing things in the service of the Lord, if they will have enough faith to try.

There is, however, one more essential component to this equation of faith: forgiveness. Jesus clearly states that God cannot forgive us if we refuse to forgive others. I love the meme that is going around Facebook: It says, "Harboring anger is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to do." This is so true! Harboring anger, hurt, and resentment hurts us emotionally, mentally and spiritually, indeed it can cost us our very salvation, and yet it does nothing to the other person. We live in a fallen world where we will inevitably be hurt (that is part of what makes us long for Heaven!). Unfortunately, at times those hurts will even come from our brethren (think Euodia and Syntyche in Philippians 4:2). Yet as the saying goes, we can either allow those experiences to make us bitter, or better. Only we can determine how another person will affect us, and Jesus makes it clear that this determination will have a direct bearing on God's ability to forgive us.

Take Action:

Is there someone who has hurt you deeply and you have struggled to forgive? Write them a letter telling them how they hurt you, and then forgiving them. This is about your heart and is only between you and God, after reading the letter out loud, burn it.

Is there someone you know or think you might have hurt? My husband and I have a saying: "feelings are always legitimate whether they are logical or not." Whether or not you believe they are right to be hurt is irrelevant (Matthew 5:23-24) go to them, apologize, and ask for their forgiveness.

Think About It:

What would the church be like if we all truly humbled ourselves before our brethren, and did

everything within our power to follow Romans 12:18, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."

The curse of the fig tree is the very last miracle Jesus performs before his crucifixion, what is the significance of this?

Read Mark 11:27-33

In my humble opinion, this is one of the most hilarious accounts in Scripture. Jesus cleanses the temple and infuriates the Jewish leaders, so they run away to their little gossip circle and plot against him. All of that plotting and they come up with the brilliant plan to publicly challenge Jesus' authority. This plan backfires so thoroughly that they are left completely dumbfounded and speechless in front of the very people who's loyalty they are trying to win back.

Think About It:

When Jesus' authority was questioned he was immediately prepared to give an answer. We live in a world in which the authority for our convictions is constantly questioned, are we as prepared as Jesus was to give an answer? (1 Peter 3:15)

Take Action:

If you cannot currently give book, chapter and verse for what you believe and why you believe it, begin to change that today. Study your beliefs openly in God's word so that Scripture is your evidence, rather than what you have heard from other men.

Read Mark 12:1-12

This is a beautiful, yet horrific picture of God's relationship with man since the beginning

of time. God created man, man rebelled, and since that time God has sent prophets and judges to try to reason with us and get us to change our ways. Also, since the beginning of time, it has been man's automatic reaction to "shoot the messenger." Finally, when all else had failed, God Almighty sent his own son, to be beaten and killed at the hands of sinful man. In this parable, why did the men kill the son? To inherit the vineyard. Why was Satan able to convince Eve to eat of the fruit? She wanted equality with God. What is ironic is the very thing we long for is the very thing God has offered us if we are obedient to Him. Romans 8:17 tells us that we are heirs with Christ and that we will ultimately be glorified with him.

Think About it:

When someone presents a difficult truth to you from God's word, what is your honest reaction? Do you "shoot the messenger," or do you appreciate the love they are showing your soul?

God has always used man as the vehicle for his message: from Moses, through the judges and prophets, to John the Baptist, Jesus the Christ, and the writers of the New Testament. We now have God's word recorded for us in written form, yet 2 Corinthians 5:20 tells us that we, as Christians, are still God's vehicle for getting His message out to the world. What kind of vehicle are you?

Take Action:

Choose one specific way that you will help spread the Gospel of Jesus the Christ this week.

Read Mark 12:13-17

On the surface, it sounds like the Pharisees and Herodians are finally realizing who Jesus is, yet the context of this passage makes it clear that

their words are empty flattery intended to soften Jesus up to their attack (they really should have known better by this point). Roman taxes were one of the "hot-button" issues of Jesus' day. In fact, after the Romans officially seized rule of the province in A.D. 6 these taxes spurred an immediate rebellion by Judas of Galilee (France 2002). After the rebellion was quickly stamped out, many of the rebels went on to become the Zealots who revolted again in A.D. 66 leading to the total destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 (France 2002). All of this together leads to the fact that the Jewish leaders are striking a low blow, and confronting Jesus publicly with a question that could in all likelihood promote a civil war.

We find ourselves in a very similar situation in modern America. Many feel that our government is no longer promoting the best interests of its citizens, and clearly it is becoming increasingly more corrupt. Many feel that we are being levied with unfair taxes, and the truth is that this is even more likely in the near future as recent laws make it possible that the church will soon lose our tax-exempt status if we fail to comply. Yet what did Jesus say? He said to give to Caesar what is Caesar's.

Think About It:

How does Jesus' response to these Jewish leaders apply to Christians today?

Read Mark 12:18-27

At this point in time the Jewish leaders are desperate. Jesus has completely stumped them, in public, every time they have confronted him, and now they are grasping at straws. Those of the Sanhedrin approach Jesus with a completely unrealistic scenario about a woman and her seven husband's. This is based upon a teaching found

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back in Genesis 38:6-10 where if a man died without producing an heir, it was his brother's duty to produce an heir in his name. Jesus has had it with these leaders and their childish ways, and publicly tells them that they have no understanding of God or the Scriptures. The whole premise of this discussion is the fact that the Sadducees, in fact, did not believe in any resurrection in the first place. Jesus concludes by pointing out the God is the God of the living.

Think About It:

How should the truth of a resurrection affect our daily lives?

Read Mark 12:28-34

For the first time, a scribe is willing to honestly consider what Jesus has been teaching, and approaches him with an honest question. The Jewish rabbis had counted no less than 613 commandments: 248 positive and 365 negative, so it is natural that, with so many, this scribe would question which was the most important (Lenski 1961). I believe we would do well to remember what Jesus answers here: love for God, love for our fellow man. While this sounds simple enough, we also need to remember how Jesus defines love in John 14:15.

Think About It:

What does John 14:15 love look like in our lives?

If we truly love our neighbor as ourselves, what will we do?

Read Mark 12:35-44

Jesus is once again comparing and contrasting those who should understand and do not, with the lowly who really get it. However this time instead of the apostles, it is the scribes that he singles out. Jesus is blatantly, publicly calling out the error of the scribes ways, and warning the people to no longer listen to them. In fact, he is telling the people that the very men who they look to for spiritual guidance will be condemned. Then enters this beautiful, lowly widow. The lesson is clear: it is not how much we do, but rather what we choose to do with what we have. As Christians, we should "give until it hurts". While this absolutely goes for our financial contributions to the Lord's work, I believe this is just the beginning. We need to be attending worship services even when we are tired or it requires missing another activity, we should be talking to those around us about Jesus the Christ even when we are uncomfortable, and we need to be studying God's word even when we are tired and would really prefer to just watch television.

Think About It:

Have we, as followers of Christ, truly been giving sacrificially? How can we do better?

Take Action:

This week, make one true sacrifice for the cause of Christ.

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By this point, Jesus has firmly drawn the line between his teachings and those of the Jewish leaders. As of now the people are on his side, and the Sanhedrin have no choice, if they wish to remain in power, but to deal with him finally and decisively. With every day bringing Jesus closer to the cross, it is vital that his followers truly begin to understand his proclamation: he IS the Christ.

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